MAUDLIN AND MODAL MYSTERY

David Lewis

Tim Maudlin claims to derive a contradiction from my account of possible worlds.[1] But the principle that plays the crucial role in Maudlin's refutation is not mine. Maudlin credits it rather to Aristotle.[2] On the one occasion when I considered something resembling Maudlin's Aristotelian principle, I took a dim view of it, saying that if it had the power to support a certain conclusion, then it could equally well support an incompatible conclusion.[3] If the combination of my account of possible worlds with Maudlin's Greek gift turns out to be contradictory, that should come as no surprise.

Here, stated more generally than Maudlin states it, is how the refutation works. Let T be some theory about the nature and structure of modal reality. (It need not be a modal realist theory.) Let T treat some questions about modal reality as mysteries. In other words, T is incomplete: for some statement, M, about modal reality, neither M nor not-M is a theorem of T. Let T treat all statements about modal reality as non-contingent: if any such statement is possibly true, then it is true *simpliciter*. And, finally, let T contain the Aristotelian principle: whatever cannot be refuted in T is possibly true. Now we are in trouble. M cannot be refuted in T, else not-M would be a theorem. Likewise not-M cannot be refuted in T, else M would be a theorem. So, by the Aristotelian principle, both M and not-M are possibly true. Both of them, being statements about modal reality, are non-contingent. So both of them are true *simpliciter:* a contradiction. T's agnosticism about M has been its downfall – together, of course, with T's acceptance of the Aristotelian principle. Beware of Greeks bearing gifts!

Here is a second version: instead of taking the contradictories M and not-M, we suppose that T is agnostic between several contraries M_1, M_2, . . . ; and we use the Aristotelian principle to show that each of these contraries is true. Here is a third version: first we use the Aristotelian principle to show that a disjunction of some of the contraries, M_2-or-M_3-or . . . , is true. Then we note that if the disjunction is true, some particular disjunct must be true. Then we use the Aristotelian principle again to show that some different one of the contrary disjuncts is true. This third version is the form that Maudlin's refutation actually takes, but that makes it unnecessarily complicated. His choice of a modal mystery is the question whether there are indiscernible possible worlds, and if so how many of them there are. But that is inessential. Any question on which T remains agnostic would serve as well.

Maudlin's presentation is further complicated by a certain elasticity in the formulation of the Aristotelian principle: 'that which . . . , being assumed, results in nothing

---

[1] 'On the Impossibility of David Lewis' Modal Realism', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 74 (1996) pp. 671-685.

[2] At the end of his paper, Maudlin does indeed liken me to an ancient Greek. But the Greek mentioned is not Aristotle.

[3] See my 'Anselm and Actuality', *Noûs* 4 (1970) pp. 175-188, esp. pp. 182-183.

impossible' is possible.[4] How shall we understand 'results' and 'impossible'? If we read 'results' simply as 'strictly implies', and 'impossible' simple as 'impossible', then indeed the Aristotelian principle will be 'tautologous' and 'unobjectionable', as Maudlin says it is. (And besides, it will stand some chance of being what Aristotle himself had in mind.) But then, since it makes no mention at all of theory *T*, it will not yield inferences premised on *T*'s agnosticism. So it will not serve the needs of Maudlin's refutation. Suppose, for instance, that although *T* has nothing to say about the question one way or the other, *M* is in fact false. *M* is non-contingent, so it is not only false but impossible. So *M does* result in something impossible – namely, *M* itself – and the Aristotelian principle as we have so far interpreted it is powerless to prove that *M* is possibly true.

If instead we read 'results' as 'results by theory *T*' and 'impossible' as 'contradicting theory *T*' (or if we read them respectively as 'results by logic alone' and 'contradicting *T*', or if we read them respectively as 'results by theory *T*' and 'contradictory by logic alone') then we have an Aristotelian principle that will meet Maudlin's needs, but will no longer be tautologous or unobjectionable.

Read one way, the Aristotelian principle is powerless to do much of anything. Read another way, it has the power to engender contradiction not only in my own, admittedly controversial theory of modal reality, but in all manner of theories of modal reality. One way, it is useless; the other way, worse than useless. Away with it!

---

[4] *Prior Analytics* 32a19. My ellipsis effects a conversion from Aristotelian terminology, in which what is necessary is not called 'possible', to modern terminology. Maudlin at one point replaces 'results' by 'entails'.